

FAITH IN THE NEXUS



Let's talk about death
(School and Church)

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The Faith in the Nexus research project.

In the Faith in the Nexus research project the term nexus refers to the connections between home, church school and the local church community.

The Faith in the Nexus project investigated the ways church primary schools, working in collaboration with churches and interested key groups, facilitated opportunities for children's exploration of faith and spiritual life in the home.

The project involved 20 church primary schools, a cross-section of Church of England and Catholic primary schools. Focus group interviews were held with 187 pupils and 267 adults (parents, staff, local clergy, and other interested key groups) and an online survey was completed by 1002 people; 730 pupils and 272 adults.

Key questions raised by the research:

How do we find space and time for children to voice their concerns about death?

How can we support adults in their responses to children's questions about death?

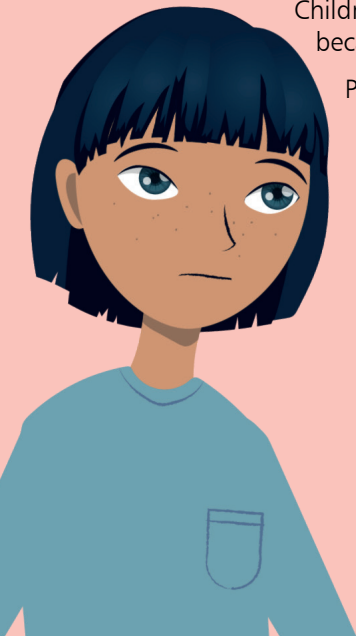
Key findings from the research:

Children often ask questions about death. They value opportunities to ask questions, and for others to listen to their opinions.

Questions about death were challenging for parents.

Children claimed they ask more questions about death because nobody fully answers these questions.

Parents noted that it was always the children raising questions about death.



We underestimate children's understanding of death. Reluctance to engage with children's questions is problematic. Looking to others to answer these questions is not best for the children.

When adults fail to answer, children were likely to persist with their questions.

How can we respond?

- A proactive approach to death conversations would be more beneficial.
- Support and encouragement is needed to empower adults at home and in school to engage in talking about death with children.
- The research suggests we need to develop ways and resources that help adults and children talk about death.



Watch

View our animation explainer at nicer.org.uk

Conversation Starters.

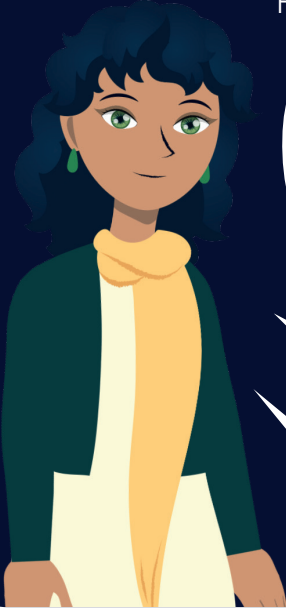
The questions children ask:

Are Gran and Grandad, going to come to ours soon, or are they going to die because they're quite old?

If I was a mighty God and people were starving when they were a baby, I would do something about it. I wouldn't watch them die.

He asks, "what if I want to go to heaven?"

How did some parents respond?



I had a mum ask me the other day, how do you answer the question when they say why does everybody have to die? ... Actually, when she said that I thought maybe I mean I can answer that question through my belief with God. (Teacher)

I get them to ask their grandfather, the difficult questions you know things about death. (Parent)

We had a lot of discussion about heaven and how you get to heaven. (Parent)

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LET'S TALK ABOUT DEATH

Children's conversations and questions about death.

What did we find?

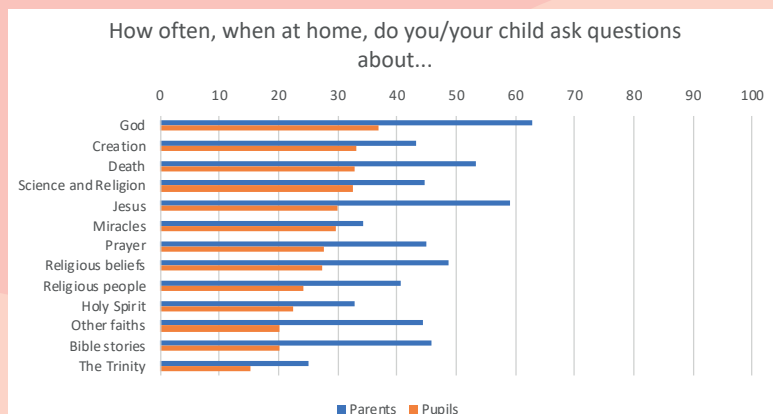
Our research survey measured how often, when at home, children ask questions about death.

We provided twelve options from topics drawn from children's talk in the interviews.

We were surprised to find that the results revealed that questions about death were consistently in the top three topics surveyed across all schools.

This result is striking as there were significant differences in children's interest in all other topics across all schools.

Why are children consistently asking questions about death, dying and life after death?



Why do children ask questions about death?

Our research found that children asked questions for a variety of reasons.

- Curiosity.
- Stimulated by discussions in RE, acts of worship.
- Bereavement, close relatives such as grandparents, pets.
- Concern for others, the homeless, refugees.
- Concern for the natural world.

Children are by nature inquisitive, and they ask questions about things they do not know, they do not understand and therefore want to know more about from their parents. Many of the pupils' concerns about death were framed in a religious context, influenced by the Christian ethos of the school.



The polar bears, they're dying because of pollution and things so I want to help them. (Pupil)

Why are people dying in Africa? (Pupil)

He asked me "mummy, when you die mummy where will you go and will you go to Jesus? Will you see Jesus and stuff?" (Pupil)

What happens in school to stimulate questions in home?

Parents thought that many of the questions about death were sparked by lessons or worship time in school.

Pupils said that discussion in religious education often made them wonder, and stimulated questions at home about death.

School visits to the church were another time when children thought about people who have died.

Why did Jesus have to die for us when he could have just come and just taught good lessons instead of sacrificing himself for us? (Pupil)

Why did Jesus go ... back up to heaven? (Pupil)

I wonder if he was even real ... because it's too miraculous he can't be real and why was he happy to die? (Pupil)

[I think about death] in Church as well because my grandpa has just died and [going to church] makes me like think about him. (Pupil)

What are the key findings from the Faith in the Nexus report?

Children stressed that the people they were most likely to ask questions about issues of life or death or spiritual matters are members of their close family.

Many parents look to the school, to those they see as 'experts' to answer these questions for their children.

Schools often do not proactively engage in conversations about death.

What can we do?

Take a more proactive approach to talking about death.

Explore the questions with children, remembering we do not always need to have the answer.

Help and support adults to confidently engage more directly with children's questions of death.

What helps children with their concerns about death?

Children told us that they used the reflection spaces provided by school as spaces to think about people who have died. Pupils spoke of praying for relatives who had died.

Children used ideas from school reflection spaces to make special spaces at home. One child designed his rabbit's grave based on a reflection space in school.

The spiritual garden is really important because, if we get sad...or just want to be alone we can pray up to God. So whether it's you're just generally feeling sad or a like a relative's died. (Pupil)

[The reflection garden is] for when people have died. We send the balloons. One person from each class goes into the reflection garden and lets go of the balloon. (Pupil)

I once went in there [the spiritual garden] when my cat died. It just helped being alone. (Pupil)

What challenges did parents say they face?

Many parents told us that they found children's questions about death the most challenging to answer.

In the focus group interviews, parents drew attention to the number of questions children ask.

- The main challenges parents found in responding were:
- Providing answers.
- Not having the correct language.
- Lack of knowledge.
- Not sharing the same Christian beliefs as the school.



How do you answer the question when they say why does everybody have to die?



There is a need to empower adults to talk and stimulate thought with the child, rather than avoid talking about death for fear of giving the wrong answer.

How did parents respond?

We found that parents often turned to grandparents, or the church school to answer children's questions about death, both general questions and those sparked by bereavement.

Parents sought to offer reassurance about death to their children.

Parents appreciated the help provided by school at times of bereavement.

- I think the teachers are very empathetic here when I lost my Mum two years ago.
- They were amazing with him across the board really you know giving him books that we could read at bedtime about grief.

Clergy found that church school parents would often turn to them at times of bereavement, even after their children had left the primary school.



It is important to proactively talk with children and (adults) about death, rather than just react at times of bereavement. For children it may be the death of a pet or something they have heard in the news that sparks their questions about death.

Questions for discussion

How do you respond to children's questions about death?

In your context, how often are children given time for quiet reflection?

Children said that RE lessons provide time for questions about death; where else are children encouraged to raise questions about death?

What resources would you benefit from to support conversations about death with children?

FURTHER READING

For the full Faith in the Nexus report and to watch our animation go to nicer.org.uk

Report references:
Talking about faith pp. 13-34.
Conclusion pp.84-91.

